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SUBJECT Secretary of Defense Harold Brown Interviewed

GEORGE HERMAN: Secretary Brown, the Iranian militants and their Ayatollah have put the bodies of the dead Americans on display at the American Embassy. Is there an Administration reaction to this event?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE HAROLD BROWN: You will recall that yesterday President Bani-Sadr said the bodies of our fallen who died in this mission would be returned without condition. Apparently, we now have a suggestion that there is going to be a barter for those bodies. That is something in which we do not propose to engage. And we find this another very disappointing and troubling example of the difficulty of dealing with this situation.

But it is a long tradition, even among enemies -- and we are not enemies of the Iranian people -- that the bodies of fallen soldiers are returned.

ANNOUNCER: From CBS News, Washington, a spontaneous and unrehearsed news interview on Face the Nation with the Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown. Secretary Brown will be questioned by CBS News Pentagon correspondent Ike Pappas; by Henry Trewhitt, diplomatic correspondent for the Baltimore Sun; and by the moderator, CBS News correspondent George Herman.

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HERMAN: Secretary Brown, in view of this newest atrocity by the militants in Iran, their public gloating display of our dead, and the suggestion that they be exchanged for Iranian money, funds held in this country, what do you think now about the safety of our hostages in the wake of our abortive attempt

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to rescue them?

SECRETARY BROWN: We continue to hold Iran responsible for the safety of the hostages. And for that reason, we believe that our hostages will not be harmed. One can never tell in this kind of situation. It was, in part, our concern for the deteriorating security situation in Iran -- as you know, they have significant hostilities across the Iranian-Iraqi border. And those of you who have seen pictures of the riots that were taking place recently in Teheran, I think, will agree with me that that security situation is deteriorating. That's part of the reason that we felt we should make an attempt at rescue at this time.

So that security situation is not good. There is a danger, there has been a danger. But we're going to continue to hold Iran responsible for the safety of those hostages.

HENRY TREWHITT: Mr. Secretary, what is your course from here? I know the Administration is still holding its options open, theoretically, for another rescue attempt if necessary. That seems to be more remote now than it might have been a couple of days ago. But don't you have to do something? Isn't the United States seen to be immobile in this situation now? And does the politics -- and I don't mean in a political sense. Doesn't the politics dictate action?

SECRETARY BROWN: The hostages, as you know, have been there for almost six months. And we have followed every possible path, kept open every option. We will continue to keep open every option. And we will spare no effort in the attempt to get our hostages returned.

We need to see what we've done and what we're doing as two parallel paths. We attempted to solve the situation quickly and by a rescue operation. But at the same time, we were proceeding, and will continue to proceed, along the other track, the diplomatic/economic track. That one, of course, now becomes even more important. We intend to pursue the line of sanctions. Of course, in that attempt, the cooperation of our allies is particularly important. And indications are that they are going to continue to cooperate.

IKE PAPPAS: Mr. Secretary, two parts to this question. Do you feel now that the rescue option has been eliminated, you have no chance now of rescuing the hostages, since they have been dispersed to other areas outside of the Iranian -- the embassy in Iran? And also, there seems to be some suggestion this morning that the hostages may be better off because they have been taken out of the American Embassy, that there may be a chance now to get them out by peaceful means.

SECRETARY BROWN: We're still not going to foreclose

any option, any option in terms of U.S. actions. The -- you will recall in the past, a number of us downgraded the rescue possibility. And now you know one of the reasons why. That was part of the element of surprise. So if I say now, "Oh, rescue's impossible," you may not believe me anyway.

But I'm not going to say anything about individual options, except to say that they'll all be kept open.

As to the movement of the hostages, I don't really want to speculate what effect that will be -- that will have. I will note this, however: that if indeed the hostages have been moved out to a number of separate locations -- and we're not really sure of that. We know what we've been told. If they've been moved out to a number of separate locations, then what you have, for everyone to see, is a group of kidnapers holding groups of Americans in various parts of another country, Iran; and the government not doing anything about it, the Iranian government not doing anything about it.

That dispersal, if it takes place, makes it even clearer what the nature of the action in holding the hostages is. It's not a political action, in terms of the usual sense. It clearly is a kidnaping.

TREWHITT: Mr. Secretary, why now? Did the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan have anything to do with delaying this operation?

SECRETARY BROWN: No. The timing is the result of the following factors, Mr. Trewhitt:

First, the question is, why didn't we wait? And the answer to that is that as the summer goes along, it gets hotter, and helicopter and fixed aircraft, fixed-wing aircraft range and payload go down as the temperature goes up. Moreover, the winds shift pattern in a way that produces a head wind going into the rendezvous point. And the helicopters were stretched, as regard their -- regards their range already. And finally, the nights get shorter, and this operation had to be carried out at night.

So, if it had gone another week or two or more than a couple of weeks into the summer, later into the spring and on into the year, it would have gotten harder and harder, to the point of impossibility.

The other question is, okay, why not earlier, in that case? The answer is that it took time to plan and to practice this operation. New equipment had to be developed. Modifications had to be made to some of the aircraft. People had to be selected and trained. We had to develop new communications equipment, and so on.

Moreover, the plan itself changed. Some of the earlier plans that we looked at really looked to us to have a rather small chance of success. This was judged by me and by the senior military people, the Joint Chiefs of Staffs and others, to have a good chance of success. But that was only after the plan had changed a number of times and had been practiced in its latest form.

HERMAN: You've been asked an awful lot of questions about the operation itself, but there's still an awful lot left, and we'll try a couple on you.

Did the plan encompass also the rescue of Mr. Laingen and his two colleagues?

SECRETARY BROWN: I don't want to talk about any part of the plan that wasn't carried out. I'll talk about what happened up to the point that the operation aborted, or perhaps a little after. But I don't want to go into the whole thing, for obvious reasons.

HERMAN: Let me try another one somewhat along the same line. This was an operation by a considerable American force in an area quite close to the Soviet Union. Did we have, for example, any contact with the Soviet Union on the hotline to assure them that there was no massive invasion?

SECRETARY BROWN: We did communicate with other countries at a point when it became clear that the operation had aborted, so that they would not mistake its nature. Until that time -- that is, until it had aborted and until all our forces were out, no one else knew about it. And we're really quite sure about that.

PAPPAS: Mr. Secretary, we know about the helicopter failures, we know about the dust storms, about all the fine details. In your opinion, what was the one reason for the failure of this mission?

SECRETARY BROWN: I don't think you can give a reason, a single reason. The -- because there was no single effect on the helicopters. Various helicopters had different difficulties. They all encountered substantial quantities of swirling dust, which caused vertigo. There was one pilot who was actually on the ground and thought he was moving, and had vertigo...

[Confusion of voices]

SECRETARY BROWN: May I finish?

Another helicopter had a hydraulic failure, and so on. One helicopter turned back, and we have not yet had a debrief on

that. And so we can't really tell.

There were several different factors that came together and caused the number of helicopters available to drop below that which had previously been established as the level of prudent risk to continue.

PAPPAS: But it was -- we were told that it was just bad luck. Now, I don't think that's a scientific enough explanation, or a professional enough explanation.

SECRETARY BROWN: Well, I haven't used the word bad luck. I've given you several things that happened, each of them independent of the other.

PAPPAS: But these elements were not factored into the planning, the possibility of dust storms or what...

SECRETARY BROWN: All the possibilities were factored in. The events proved to be worse than we had expected. Not worse than we could have conceived. It would have been possible to conceive even more adverse conditions. But in setting an operational plan of this sort, what you do is, you decide how bad things are likely to be, and then you put in a prudent safety factor. And then if things are much worse even than that safety factor has allowed for, then you abort the operation.

If you try to account for everything that might conceivably happen, then the operation grows in size and scope and starts to produce difficulties merely by nature of its size.

HERMAN: Since you mention the safety factor, did you have any other helicopters available to you on the Nimitz or any of the other carriers?

SECRETARY BROWN: No. We went to -- six was the number that we needed in operating condition at the refueling point after the refueling to have good confidence of proceeding on. We therefore started with seven, which is the standard factor for large helicopters. We then decided to take an additional safety factor and go with eight. And that's how many went over the coast.

HERMAN: But did you have more on the carrier?

SECRETARY BROWN: There were not more. But even if there were more, by that time, it would not have been possible to add helicopters, because you're already getting quite late in the operation. You would have had to add additional refueling, and so forth. And under those circumstances, had there been additional helicopters on the aircraft carrier, we would still not have been able to on with the operation.

TREWHITT: Secretary Brown, do you draw any general lessons from this about the quality of personnel, quality of maintenance? You lost, what -- well, a third of your assets, really, in this operation.

SECRETARY BROWN: We started with eight helicopters. At the refueling point, we had six, one of which lost a hydraulic line and could not go on. One of the other ones that dropped out of the mission dropped out for mechanical reasons, different mechanical reasons. One turned back because of operational difficulties. And as I say, we haven't finished the debriefing on that. So far as we know, a quarter of them suffered mechanical difficulties.

But you have to remember, again, that this is a very, very taxing mission. These helicopters have a range, with the additional fuel tanks that we added, long enough to go this distance, but not with any margin of safety, or not with much margin of safety. And they were flying low to the ground, in order to avoid discovery.

[Confusion of voices]

SECRETARY BROWN: Well, Iranian radar. They were flying under very difficult conditions, more difficult than the weather forecast had shown.

Put all those things together, and I don't draw any conclusions about the general quality of our maintenance. I draw the conclusion, which I knew before, that helicopters are more difficult to operate and maintain than fixed-wing aircraft. We knew that before. And that's why we had a margin of safety here.

As to the quality of our personnel, they were brave, they were dedicated, they were well-trained. And naturally, they ran into some difficulties. But I have no fault to find. We're going to have to, again, investigate, debrief, and so on. I think it would be a bad mistake for us to try to find goats among our personnel at this point.

PAPPAS: Mr. Secretary, the allies feel betrayed because they weren't informed. We know why. You've explained why the allies were not told beforehand. But can we, do you think, count on them to support our sanctions now? Do you feel that they're going to go with us across the board on this?

SECRETARY BROWN: Our allies -- all of our allies understand why they were not consulted and informed of this kind of operation. They had expected to be informed and consulted and discussed with before there was a military operation of the kind that had been talked about a great deal in public: blockade, mining. But, naturally, they understand that security cannot be

maintained if a lot of people outside those who are actually doing the operation are informed about it.

With respect to their actions from now on, I believe they fully understand that it is important, in order to avoid having to go to more extreme actions, that they cooperate with us on the diplomatic front and the economic front and move forward on sanctions. And as I say -- said earlier, the indications are that they are going to continue to do that, as they have been doing.

One thing is clear from this rescue operation. The United States feels very strongly about the hostages and getting them back. Our allies understand this better now even than they did before. And I think the Iranians understand it better now even than they did before.

HERMAN: Secretary Brown, this is a question the answer to which is not known to me, but I'm sure must be known by now to the Iranians. And that is, the nightmare in any operation of this kind where, what, six, seven of our craft are left on the ground is, are any secret documents left in usable condition? Is any secret equipment left behind in usable or studiable condition?

SECRETARY BROWN: There may well have been some equipment left in studiable condition. But it's too early to say, because, although, as you say, the Iranians know and you don't know, I'm not sure myself. Some of the helicopters were burning. We don't know for sure whether others might have caught fire or been destroyed even by the Iranians before they got to look inside. So we don't know for sure. It's a possibility, but I don't want to go further than that.

PAPPAS: Mr. Secretary, just to clarify one point you made earlier. You said that we are continuing to hold Iran responsible for the safety of the hostages. Now, is that a threat to use military action if they're harmed?

SECRETARY BROWN: It's a simple statement, and I'll repeat it, but I won't expand on it. We do hold -- we do hold Iran responsible for what happens to the hostages.

PAPPAS: ...a little interpretation, also.

SECRETARY BROWN: I'm sure you'll be willing to give it at great length. But I'm going simply to repeat it. We hold Iran responsible.

TREWHITT: Let me try to get at it this way, if I may, Mr. Secretary. There was a time when we were talking about the possibility...

SECRETARY BROWN: You know, we're moving forward on a peaceful front. What's what we want. We want to get the hostages back peacefully. But we're going to hold Iran responsible for what happens to them.

TREWHITT: At one point, Secretary Brown, we were discussing the possibility of military action, apart from the rescue mission.

SECRETARY BROWN: Yes.

TREWHITT: Roughly mid-May, sometime later. You say today that allied cooperation is at least as important as before, and perhaps more so.

SECRETARY BROWN: Yes.

TREWHITT: Question: The allies say they're going to take additional sanctions against Iran on May the 17th. Now, doesn't this imply that you really are ruling out any further military action until sometime considerably after May the 17th, to give their sanctions an opportunity to work?

SECRETARY BROWN: I don't want to set forth a schedule. I think -- or a deadline. I think that this is a time to stress peaceful ways of resolving the problem. And I want to do -- that's what I'm doing. It is going to take time to resolve it peacefully. That's been clear from the beginning. And we want to press forward on that line, without ruling anything out completely.

HERMAN: Before you go altogether on the peaceful side, let me ask you -- try one more time on the operation, without asking you any of the details.

Are you worried about some friends of the United States in Teheran who might be threatened or damaged, might have been willing to help us or plans to help us, who might be damaged by the failure?

SECRETARY BROWN: If you're talking about political elements in Iran...

HERMAN: I was being a little more specific.

SECRETARY BROWN: ...favorable to the United States -- excuse me?

HERMAN: I was being a little more specific, some people who might have been either prepared or in the plan to help us in this operation.

SECRETARY BROWN: Oh, I -- you know, I don't want to talk about the plan or the effects of the plan beyond the point at which it aborted.

HERMAN: I understand.

SECRETARY BROWN: You know, there were additional parts to the plan. I just don't want to go into them now, except to say that, you know, we weren't going to leave everybody there after the refueling. They were going to move to another place and hide out.

HERMAN: So some people were not moved in the plan. And is there some -- have you heard anything that gives you reason to worry about them?

SECRETARY BROWN: You know, I'm simply not going to talk about the parts of the plan that we didn't execute.

PAPPAS: Does that apply also for the possibility that some of the hostages may have known that you were coming? And how would they...

SECRETARY BROWN: Oh, I would not want to say anything about that. You know, that -- I think, again, the best way to answer that is what I have answered, and I'm not going to go beyond it.

HERMAN: Let me try one other direction, which is not in this dangerous area. The Foreign Minister of Iran, Mr. Ghotbzadeh, has said that if the United States tries something, they will block the Persian Gulf.

Can they? Can we stop them?

SECRETARY BROWN: That, I think, is one I can answer. The attempts to block the Persian Gulf, as has been suggested, by sinking ships in it, in the Straits of Hormuz, are not really feasible. That's a wide strait and there's a wider one next to it.

There is, of course, the possibility of military action, I suppose, implied in Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh's statement, a blockade of the United States or of the other countries in the Gulf. I don't really think he means that. And I think, therefore, that this is not one of our more serious concerns. I don't want to dismiss anything, but I would say that we're able to handle that from its military aspects. We have a very large and substantial, strong naval force in the area.

TREWHITT: Mr. Secretary, does the Administration still, as it was a couple of months ago, still think of quickly restoring relations with Iran once this situation is resolved? And I realize

I'm looking far forward now. In order to preserve the Persian Gulf for the Western democracies.

SECRETARY BROWN: If we can resolve -- and I deeply hope we can -- this hostage issue, then I think the way is open to, and we're quite eager to, establish good relations with Iran. They're obviously not going to go from what they are to deep friendship. But it's -- and, you know, we don't expect that. But we do want to be friends with the Iranian revolutionary government. And we believe that a stable, a unified, a strong Iran, neutral, Islamic, is something that we could have good relations with. And we believe that would help the stability of the region. We believe it would help to block Soviet expansionism.

HERMAN: Do you see anything that worries about Soviet expansionism into Iran? You have worried about that publicly before.

SECRETARY BROWN: Yes, I still -- I still do, because it is clear that there are elements in this political broth in Iran that are really Soviet-oriented and would like to turn Iran into a Soviet satellite or into another Afghanistan. That would be disastrous for the region. It would be very harmful to us. And it would be terrible, indeed, for the Iranians.

HERMAN: Thank you very much, Secretary of Defense Brown, for being our guest today on Face the Nation.